

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 14

30 March 1987

Reagan's Get-Tough Strategy in Gulf Could End Up Making Matters Worse

STAT

WASHINGTON INSIGHT

By JOHN WALCOTT

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WASHINGTON—The Reagan administration's effort to restore its credibility in the Persian Gulf after the Iran debacle could instead make matters worse.

The president last month approved a strategy to reassure Iraq and the Gulf states that the U.S. has seen the folly of trying to appease Iran and is replacing the carrot with a stick in its dealings with the Tehran regime.

In a Feb. 25 statement, Mr. Reagan retracted his claim that the Iranians had stopped fomenting terrorism, and he accused Iran of trying to intimidate and destabilize its moderate neighbors. At the same time, Secretary of State George Shultz and other officials have been trying to resuscitate Operation Staunch, Washington's effort to cut off arms sales to Iran.

Kuwait Is Offered Protection

The Pentagon has proposed new U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia. And last week, after it was disclosed that Iran had deployed Chinese-made Silkworm anti-ship missiles near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the administration publicly offered Navy ships to escort Kuwaiti vessels through the Gulf.

With the U.S.'s dependence on imported oil on the rise again, the need to restore American influence in the Persian Gulf is plain. But Mr. Reagan's initiative isn't likely to impress anybody, could backfire and doesn't address the most serious threat to the region—Iran's grinding war of attrition with Iraq.

One problem is that nothing Mr. Reagan says is apt to carry much weight in the Gulf. "He said he was trying to stop other nations from selling arms to Iran and then we found out he was selling them himself," says a senior Persian Gulf diplomat. "Why should we believe what he says now?"

Second, the administration's saber-rattling offer to protect Kuwaiti shipping in the Gulf may endanger any chance for closer cooperation between the U.S. and Kuwait, a nation that has survived by performing a delicate balancing act with its more powerful neighbors—not by hiring Western bodyguards.

After U.S. officials began talking publicly about their offer, Kuwaiti officials, who for months had been gingerly exploring cooperation with the U.S., said they

would welcome a joint U.S.-Soviet effort to safeguard shipping in the Gulf. But they insisted they hadn't asked the U.S. to intervene.

"The administration is setting itself up," says Thomas McNaugher of the Brookings Institution, a Washington think-tank. "As the talk about escorting Kuwaiti ships becomes more public, the Kuwaitis are likely to back down."

Talk about an avowedly neutral U.S. escorting vessels through a declared war zone for the first time since 1941 also has set off alarm bells in Congress. After members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee met with National Security Adviser Frank Carlucci last week, some came away concerned that the administration was ready to send American seamen in harm's way without consulting Congress under the War Powers Act or considering the implications of such action.

It's easy to see how the U.S. could get more deeply involved in the Gulf war, especially with the administration casting about for ways to reassert itself in the region. It's harder to see how the U.S. would extricate itself—short of attacking Iran—to eliminate the threat to Gulf shipping.

But more military involvement almost certainly would strengthen the hand of the most virulently anti-Western elements in Iran and might invite retaliation from Iranian-backed terrorists against U.S. installations, businesses or citizens. "Where do you go once you start down this road?" asks Mr. McNaugher.

What Kind of Response?

It isn't even clear that the new threat to Gulf shipping deserves a serious response. U.S. military officers concede that Iran's missiles aren't a serious threat to oil-supply lines. "Their range is limited, their accuracy is questionable, and if they fired one we could take the rest out very quickly," says a Pentagon official.

Worse, the administration's initiatives may be missing a concern far more important than the supposed danger to shipping—the growing threat posed throughout the region by Iran's militant, fundamentalist regime. U.S. intelligence analysts say there is evidence that Iraq's defenses may be wearing thin in the face of Iran's relentless, suicidal offensives. Pentagon officials say the Iranians are bringing thousands of fresh recruits to the southern front near the key Iraqi port city of Basra. The Iranians aren't easily discouraged: U.S. intelligence sources say their latest advance gained a meager 500 yards on the southern

front at a cost of as many as 20,000 killed and wounded.

Finally, while the administration struggles to recover from the disastrous Iran arms sales, some U.S. intelligence analysts believe that Ayatollah Khomeini's regime already is rebounding from the slump in oil prices and the civil unrest that accompanied it. Iran's oil exports are back to 1.4 million barrels a day and domestic opposition to the costly war with Iraq, which appeared to be growing, could subside if oil revenues continue to increase and Iranian troops keep advancing, says one U.S. official.

"There's no sudden breakthrough in sight, but the Iranians may have bottomed out last year and they may be getting stronger again," says the official. "That isn't good news."

STAT